At the Intersection of Life and Literature: Finding Identity When There's No There There

by Gwen Klinkey

To be Native is to live in a state of limbo. Living on land allotted to tribes that was stolen through vicious and inhuman methods. Being shamed for the alcoholism that stems from the liquor stores placed oh-so-strategically on the edges of reservations. Waiting for women and girls who will never come home, stolen year after year without response. Each Native person is subject to some other aspect in their life which complicates their life further than just their familial heritage, whether it's disability, gender, poverty, or otherwise.

In Tommy Orange's *There There*, each character represents a different intersectional lens that lends itself to communicating the struggle for identity in a world where every piece of one's person is able to be undermined at any moment. Jacquie Red Feather, an aging alcoholic who has all but abandoned her grandchildren struggles with her place in life while trying to reconcile her childhood trauma with her adult trauma. Tony Loneman tries to navigate life as someone with fetal alcohol syndrome that lives a less than affluent lifestyle. Edwin Black fights with depression while searching for his biological father. The wide variety of backgrounds featured through the use of many different character's points of view pulls on nearly all aspects of human life by layering lenses of the human experience and allows for the audience to emotionally connect with characters on a more personal level, leaving them more likely to listen to and empathise with the characters meant to communicate the silenced stories of modern Native Americans.

Intersectionality is a relatively new concept. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, "intersectionality" was originally used when speaking about black women and feminism. In 2015

the term was finally added to the *Oxford English Dictionary* and defined as "the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage" (qtd. in Perlman). Intersectionality has always been but only recently became a necessity when speaking about any sort of civil rights movement or idea. For example, in conjunction with the Black Lives Matter movement people should consider not only race, but that certain members of the black community may be dealing with extra issues or scrutiny like transgender individuals, women, and low income families. Although movements as a whole typically take a broader look at civil rights, intersectionality begins to break identities down into more specific categories and provides a more personal approach to waves of change.

It is within this high level of specificity that narrative literature typically operates. Whether in traditional print, film, social media, video games or any other storytelling platform, characters need development. Generalized and vague characterization doesn't attract audiences, but getting more personal with characters and layering each aspect of their personality on top of each other in a more intersectional lens allows the reader to step into a different person's life and view the story from a particular perspective. *There There* asks its readers to take the perspective of a great multitude of people from all different personal backgrounds, but has one (near) constant — Native heritage.

Although never said in such specific words, Tommy Orange has spoken many times about his personal experience with intersectionality. In an interview with the *New York Times* Orange recounted his childhood and spoke about his lifelong struggle between his father's heritage as a Native American Church leader and Cheyenne tribe member and his mother's as a white, evangelical Christian who believed that his father's religious practices were demonic

(Alter). Not only is Orange walking the line between two racial identities, but two religious and philosophical identities as well without taking into account the many other aspects of his life. One struggle of his that seems to pop up quite often is not just the reconciliation of the different categories included in intersectionality, but the checking of two boxes within one category as mentioned with his two dichotic parental figures.

With the history of Native Americans being so spotty and blurred it can be hard for those who identify as someone with Native heritage to find that part of themselves given the often chaotic information and depictions shown to the general American populace. There has even been a recent, more widespread crisis in which many young Native people are not able to be enrolled in their tribes due to the fact that they "are not eligible under blood quantum requirements, generally defined as the share of their ancestors documented as full-blood Natives" (embracerace.org). This not only can prevent those young people from learning about their heritage, but from receiving tribal government services like health care, housing, and more which adds more complication to identities by including many people in another category of intersectionality, low economic status.

In *There There* many characters suffer from similar situations or events. Edwin Black begins his story still at his mother's house, unemployed, and insecure — mentally, emotionally, and financially (Orange 63). Although it is unclear whether or not this stems from a lack of tribal enrollment, unfortunately bureaucracy and paperwork don't make for particularly captivating stories, the fact is that Edwin has all of these categories to try to figure into his developing sense of identity. In addition to the economic and racial status he maintains, Edwin has body image issues due to a recent weight gain because of the depression he suffered while being unemployed and listless and consequently struggles with his social life as well (Orange 68). Layering these

states of being on top of each other complicates Edwin's sense of self, but also opens the door for readers to be able to connect with various parts of his character and understand his struggle in a way that wouldn't otherwise be able to.

As mentioned earlier, many civil rights movements focus on one larger group identity, in the case of *There There* the Native heritage all the main characters share. Edwin plays into that. He tries to contact his biological father to learn more about who he is and works as a heritage center as well, but the underlying currents of Edwin's more intersectional identity as an overweight, depressed, and financially compromised twenty-year-old man who possesses a degree he currently has no use for is a more human, specific, and relatable person that many people, especially college students and recent college graduates, will easily connect with. This connection makes audiences more vulnerable while reading, just as it does in conversation, and opens the reader's mind to other struggles that they may not be able to relate to as much.

There There presents itself as an opportunity to listen to Native stories and let their all too often silenced voices be heard. The intersectionality inherent in the stories opens the door beyond the original chance to listen, and lets readers be present in the stories as themselves. By casting such a wide net of specific identities through the dozen or so characters Orange presents the audience with, the push for at the very least acknowledgement, moves beyond the wider scope of the Native identity, but the identity found in each individual situation.

In the end, however, readers are left with little to no answers. Edwin may or may not be alive and hasn't quite found the person who he wants to be yet, and, just as many other characters, like Jacquie Red Feather, is left wobbling on the precipice of the next step to finding that more individualized identity. This seemingly "unfinished" ending leaves readers to come up with their own ending. While readers can rattle off lists of possible endings, they often find

themselves drawn to an ending for at least one character in particular. The one ending that would make them, as the character they identified with the most, the happiest, or maybe not. Perhaps the ending they create is one that that individual reader despises. Either way, Orange's call-to-action at the tail end of his book requires readers to complete the story themself, and challenges audiences to make it one they would be happy seeing themselves in if they were the character.

Intersectional identities like those exhibited in *There There* do not necessarily exist for the purpose of being acknowledged, but work under the surface to draw readers in and make not only better characters, but turn characters into tools that writers can use in the moral or message of their stories. By questioning and calling to action not only his characters, but Orange's readers as well, audiences become implicated in whatever ending occurs which forces the reader into being held accountable for themselves and asks what readers owe to that character that so closely reflects them. A listening ear, devotion, action. Whatever it may be, Tommy Orange leaves it in the reader's hands to either let the stories run their course or step up and create their own future not only for the characters, but change the real world as well.

Works Cited

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